

Book Reviews

Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation by D. Stephen Long (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 272 pp.

D. STEPHEN LONG'S *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation* is not, as its title might seem to indicate, a book about rescuing the eternal soul of Karl Barth, who was one of the most important Reformed theologians of the twentieth century. It is, rather, a book about the soul of Karl Barth's theology and the fate of that theology's interpretation in modern scholarship. It is also a book about the friendship between Barth and the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. These two facets of Long's book are always to be read together: this is a book about how Barth is to be understood fruitfully in the present era, and also a book about how Balthasar's friendship with him—alongside Balthasar's own interpretation of him—serves as a model for the continued impact of Barth's theology today. "The following argument," explains Long, ". . . [is] a defense of the conversation between them and of a way of doing theology that involves friendship rather than conquest" (2).

Long's book proceeds first through history and then through theology. He begins with a detailed review of Balthasar's friendship or "preoccupation" with Barth, both in terms of chronology and in terms of Balthasar's major works on Barth (chs. 1 and 2, pp. 7–88). Then follows the "collapse" of Balthasar's interpretation in Protestant and Catholic theological circles alike (89–128). The first half of the book is thus spent recalling the historical realities of Balthasar's work with and on Barth, as well as the strong critiques that work received both at the time and in present theology. Long's last three chapters detail the "positive theological gains" (3) of Barth and Balthasar's relationship, one that affected them each in their theologies of God (129–176), their ethics (177–238), and their ecclesiologies (239–282). The implication is not only that the two influenced one another in helpful ways, but also that their mutual

influence ought to continue to deepen the theology of today. "I suspect, and worry," writes Long, "that current trends in Protestant and Catholic theology may be repeating the entrenched Protestant and Catholic positions that made Barth and Balthasar's friendship so unlikely and yet theologically necessary" (5). It is a necessity that extends into the present age.

The concerns of these last three chapters—God, ethics, church—are the concerns of the entire work. Barth and Balthasar are each formed by interests in theologies that articulate a strongly theocentric perspective that is simultaneously ethical and ecclesial, though each comes to distinctive ways of articulating that perspective. Long arranges the two theologians' concerns with care for what unites the thought on God, ethics, and ecclesiology for both men: Christology. Balthasar thought that Barth's dogmatics "captured the glory of Christian revelation," explains Long (12), and that this glory that Barth captures is fundamentally the glory of God in Christ (see esp. 42–47, 81–86). In other words, Balthasar has profound appreciation for Barth's Christology. It is what draws the former to the latter. For Balthasar, Barth has in his own way reached into the very center of Christianity, the center that Catholicism also holds and adores. This, for Balthasar, makes Barth similar to that most "Catholic" of thinkers, Thomas Aquinas. As Long describes it, Barth "is a radical Thomist because, like Thomas, he consistently thinks the form of Christianity: the incarnation" (45).

The Incarnation also serves as the foundation for Barth's reciprocation of Balthasar's friendship. In the book, Barth's friendship with Balthasar is characterized as one aspect of an entire attitude that Barth embodied toward Catholicism, an attitude that involves willingness to "suffer" it or to be challenged by it (see 13–20). Long writes, "[Barth] envisioned a robust Protestant theology that would be as grounded upon the solid truth of dogma as Catholicism, but he meant something different by 'dogma' than . . . Roman Catholics" (19). Despite such "suffering" and dogmatic difference, Barth saw in Catholicism a thorough and lively interaction with revelation, one that he strove to imitate even as he set himself against and apart from it. In Long's assessment, both men are drawn together by serious Christological convictions, convictions that set them against the theological modernism that would prefer to mask Christ in the watered-down language of simple ethics and epistemological platitudes (see 88, 120, et passim). That is, for Long, both theologians represent deep and consistent engagement with the uniqueness of Christ.

It is also through Christology that we are able to grasp what separates both men: the *analogia entis*. Barth is famous for his rejection of the *analo-*

gia entis, which he said “was the reason he could never become Roman Catholic” (7). In Barth’s mind, the analogy of being lays hold of the revelation of God by both conditioning it—through a metaphysic that shapes and determines the nature of revelation—and by determining the form of our reception of it (cf. 155–156). Barth’s rejection of the doctrine seeks to emphasize God as the primary actor in revelation, both in its giving and in its receiving, and Catholic metaphysical thought appears to contradict this primacy. It would seem to be possible to know God without the help of God, and this Barth finds intolerable. In response to Barth’s objections, Balthasar works hard to show that Barth’s own dogmatic project has always, at its best, presupposed analogy—not merely of faith, but also of being—and that the *analogia entis* is not a pre-determined created means by which Catholics might lay hold of God (12–13, 41–48, 132–136). For Balthasar, the *analogia entis* enables theology not because it stands outside of theology or is a prolegomena to it, but because it is part of a thorough Christology. Such a Christology is able to describe how God employs the full breadth of worldly being in order to express divine being, even as that expression at the same time reveals the “ever-greater” difference between God and the world (see esp. the discussion on 55–62). In other words, the *analogia entis* is an essential part of a thoroughly Chalcedonic Christology. Still, Balthasar thought that Barth had detected a real temptation in Catholicism but had misidentified it as the *analogia entis*. Instead, the problem rests in *natura pura*, or a “pure nature” that exists apart from grace (see, in the same discussion, 56–60). Balthasar affirms a hypothetical *natura pura*—or else grace simply eradicating an empty nature—but with reservations. He thinks that a doctrine of pure nature articulated too strongly outside the realm of grace devolves into an unfortunate, schematized dualism between the natural and supernatural orders of creation. So, while pure nature is a necessary hypothesis, and the *duplex ordo* of Vatican I is always to be affirmed, the reality at hand is the reality of grace perfecting nature. In Long’s words, Balthasar “did not think theology within, or upon the ground floor of, philosophy, but philosophy within theology” (56). For Balthasar, the ability to think within theology is ultimately what makes Barth so relevant, not only to Protestants, but also to Catholics. Even Barth’s rejection of the analogy of being, which in Balthasar’s mind Barth misunderstands, is not enough to sideline him. Barth thinks the “form” of theology, and everyone ought to listen.

The disagreement between Barth and Balthasar over the *analogia entis* serves as the major backdrop both for the theological friendship between the two men and for the subsequent collapse of Balthasar’s interpretation

of Barth in both Protestant and Catholic theologies. In the case of the latter, Catholic theologians are experiencing a renaissance of studies in Thomas Aquinas, and these studies have brought into question Balthasar's own theology of nature and grace, as well as his positive interpretation of Barth as a "Thomistic" theologian. Long reviews the Catholic disagreement in some detail. In essence, Catholics are concerned with both Balthasar's and Barth's theology because they both fail to take nature seriously enough to make sense of revelation. These theologians think that both Balthasar and Barth underestimate the importance of *natura pura* and its relevance to the theological task. Long explains that, for these thinkers, a weak or nonexistent doctrine of pure nature dilutes the centrality of Vatican I's *duplex ordo* and—here is perhaps the most important objection—at the same time surrenders to modernity by denying natural knowledge of God (90–99). In this way, the contemporary Catholic objection to Balthasar's interpretation of Barth resembles Balthasar's own concerns about Barth's works at the time they were written (20–22).

Protestant objections to Balthasar's interpretation of Barth agree with the Catholic objections, though they assess its value distinctly: for both groups, Barth is thoroughly modern (99). This is a cause for concern with Catholic interpreters, whereas for Protestant interpreters of Barth, his modernity is why he remains relevant to theology. Bruce McCormack is perhaps most central here, as he sees Barth as the beginning of a new theological turn that moves away from traditional descriptions of revelation and toward an "ontology of election." Long explains that, while Catholics "argue the incarnation makes no sense without the metaphysical language of nature, substance, and hypostasis, McCormack argues that it makes no sense with them. They must be jettisoned for a theological ontology found in election" (108). In other words, McCormack intensifies Barth's rejection of the analogy of being. In his interpretation and scholarship like his, Barth's work on dialectic receives more radicalization rather than less over time, and this dialectic is thoroughly involved in Kantian epistemology and ethics (120). Here, the risk in Balthasar's interpretation for Protestant thinkers seems to be that of losing what made Barth so innovative, which was his intense dialectical mode of theology, one that parts ways from the theological past and so frees theology from that past (see esp. 112–118). God's radical freedom to express himself thus sunders itself from any form of knowing other than its own free expression, and this is Barth's great insight that must be preserved.

Long, for his part, is concerned that these new battle-lines over

Balthasar and Barth are in fact very old ones, that they reveal divisions between Catholics and Protestants that pit the integrity of nature against the integrity of God's freedom. The last three chapters of *Saving Karl Barth* thus work to show how it is helpful to understand not only how the two theologians influenced each other, but also how this influence destabilizes neither nature nor God's freedom. Rather, it destabilizes the old ecclesial divisions that have marked theology. Of the several extended arguments that Long makes, three serve as exemplars of his essential outlook. The first is to follow Balthasar in the rejection of Nominalist metaphysics in favor of a realist metaphysic that affirms the *potentia oboedientialis*. For Long, this argument shows that Barth should, in order to be consistent, affirm the analogy of being precisely because of the Incarnation (161–162). That is, a natural potency for faith understood through a Christological *analogia entis*, as found in Balthasar, safeguards the supernatural end of human nature by its very affirmation of that nature. It helps to make sense of the Incarnation by safeguarding the role that Christ's humanity plays in salvation. The second argument is the affirmation of Barth's dictum that "dogmatics is ethics," which is an effort to link dogmatic and ethical thought in a serious, though unconfused, way (179–191). Long sees both Barth and Balthasar working out this dictum in their separate theological projects. "Barth and Balthasar shared a desire not to make the modern move of reducing theology to ethics," Long explains, "while at the same time recognizing dogmatics entails the theory and practice of good human action" (190). The third argument wrestles with what Long sees as an instructive but severe disagreement between Barth and Balthasar over the place and role of the church, which the former saw as important but separate from Christ's work, and which the latter saw as fundamental to and an extension of Christ's work. On this third point, Balthasar's own dilemma is a most helpful summary: "Balthasar's theology was always caught between these two poles: convincing Catholics they were as Christological as Barth's Reformed theology, and convincing Protestants they could affirm the *analogia entis* and thereby glimpse the whole creation as God's good gift, through, and for . . . the hypostatic union" (277). Ecclesiology is thus a source of lasting disagreement between Barth and Balthasar, even as both men sought ecclesial renewal for the sake of Christ.

The major achievements of Long's *Saving Karl Barth* are several. The most accessible achievement is its detailed review of the friendship between Barth and Balthasar and the impact it has had on theological conversations from their own time until now. It is a difficult balance to

achieve, since interpretations of both Barth and Balthasar vary widely, and since the sheer amount of effort involved in collecting their mutual history is immense. The real worth of the book is in its significantly more complex undercurrent of theological assessment as it reviews the history at hand. Here, Long attempts to bridge what seems to be an ever-widening gulf between Reformed and Catholic theologians over the matters of Christology and metaphysics, and thus over their respective doctrines of God, of grace, and of revelation. Long is sympathetic to the two poles between which Balthasar's theology was "always caught," and the book reads as a major effort to see that these theological tensions continue to be worked out in modern theology, rather than slackening by drifting apart from one another. Long critiques both Catholic and Protestant objections to Balthasar's interpretation of Barth, and in many ways the work is an attempt to save that interpretation.

One might well ask why Balthasar's interpretation is worth saving, and for Long it is worth saving because of its ecumenical importance. Here at last—though in fact on every page—the book emerges as a major work of ecumenism. The book is unusual for an ecumenical work of theology because it steps through and amid the complex perspectives of its two central interlocutors, Barth and Balthasar, and so it has no explicit "program" of ecumenical outcomes. It is unusual as well in its sympathy for the divisions that lasted between Barth and Balthasar, divisions that the book does not attempt to resolve or dilute. For Long, it is clear that what makes ecumenism possible is Christology: the Christology of glory that both Barth and Balthasar loved, the Christology irradiated by the *analogia entis* as Balthasar understood it, the Christology driven immediately into ethics, as Barth so vividly grasped. This Christologically-driven ecumenical perspective is amenable to neither staunch modernist Barthians nor staunch "ressourcement Thomists" in Long's parlance. In a certain sense, this Barthian-Balthasarian Christology provokes as much as it unites.

The book is well-written and provocative, and yet also at times a challenge to read, requiring familiarity with either Barth or Balthasar's works, if not both, as well as with arguments surrounding nature, grace, and the analogy of being. While the complexity of the book does much to indicate Long's extensive and careful knowledge of several fields in theology, all of which are vital to grasp the relationship between Balthasar and Barth, the density of the book's content may be an obstacle for a reader unfamiliar with at least one portion of the book's massive interests. Long is also at times distracted by what to do with the analogy of being, as he—like Balthasar—supports it while having suspicions about

the doctrine of pure nature. This concern sometimes dominates the book, perhaps distorting the role it plays in either theologian's *oeuvre*. In this way, *Saving Karl Barth* at times succumbs to the very tensions that it attempts to bridge. In Long's defense, nature-grace debates are a concern that preoccupies current scholarship on both Barth and Balthasar. These troubles are provocative, even as they obfuscate, and in the long run reinforce the relevance and breadth of the scholarship at play in the text. The perplexity of the book is the perplexity of our ecumenical present, which challenges scholars to lay hold of their convictions and at the same time to listen.

Saving Karl Barth is fierce and successful in its various achievements, and in that sense all the more troubling and challenging for its success. If Long is right, and the friendship between Barth and Balthasar ought to be a model for present theological endeavors, then one ought to be troubled by the division among its interpreters at present. At the same time, if Long is right, then theology is presented with a refreshing challenge for its current context, which is to continue the dialogue begun between Barth and Balthasar, rather than letting it fade into the past. For this reason alone, among many others, *Saving Karl Barth* is a worthwhile and supremely relevant book in modern scholarship. N&V

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The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification by David Vincent Meconi, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), xxii + 280 pp.

DAVID MECONI teaches Patristic Theology at St. Louis University. The book under review here is his first published monograph (he has edited or co-edited a number of other volumes) and is derived from a doctoral thesis completed at Oxford under the direction of Oliver O'Donovan. Meconi's central purpose is to elucidate the place of deification in Augustine's theology, and he does this both narrowly, by examining Augustine's uses of the verb *deificare*, and broadly, by treating Augustine's understanding of the creature's union with God. The book is a fine piece of work: modest, careful, accurate, thoughtful, and theologically interesting. It is also certainly the first book-length treatment of its subject in English, and perhaps in any language.

Meconi's study appears motivated in part by a desire to rebut readings

of Augustine that contrast his thought too severely with the emphasis on deification typical of large tracts in the Orthodox tradition. Claims that Augustine has no interest in deification, or that his theology permits no place for the idea, or that he is a theologian of justification rather than deification (there are many other variants) have often been made by both Catholic and Orthodox exegetes and interpreters of Augustine, though more often and more excitedly by the Orthodox. Meconi wants to show, and succeeds in showing, that in their crude forms, these judgments, and especially the more sweeping among them (I have in mind as representative example Pavel Florensky's occasional anti-Augustinianism), are not adequate as interpretations of Augustine's texts. Augustine does, indeed, have a place for the idea of deification; he does, indeed, use the word (eighteen times in the entire corpus); and he does, indeed, have a deep conceptual, pastoral, and homiletic interest, from the beginning to the end of his career, in the idea that all creatures, in their different ways, have profound intimacy with the Lord as their proper end and real possibility.

Meconi begins (chapters one and two) by treating Augustine's theology of creation—both of creatures in general and of human creatures in particular. For this, he draws mostly from *De Genesi ad litteram* [Literal Commentary on Genesis] and emphasizes Augustine's depiction of the deformity of the entire created order, together with the intensified instance of this in Augustine's *imago*-theology of the human creature. In a nice summary phrase, Meconi writes that, "Created *ad imaginem Dei*, human persons are simultaneously God's receptive icons as well as God's distinct others" (35). This formulation contains one of the book's leitmotifs: that union with God—deification—is given as possibility by the very fact of being a human creature, and yet that such union never abolishes the difference between God and human creatures. The key category for explaining this, in Meconi's presentation of Augustine, is participation: the unity with God indicated by the term "deification" is, in fact, a kind of participation in which "the participant never becomes identical with or absorbed into the one in whom it participates" (51). Participation yields the degree of similarity to God proper to a particular creaturely kind, but it never, not even in the case of the human creature, yields identity. Meconi's exegetical treatment of the range and intensity of Augustine's tropes for intimacy between God and human creatures (*cohaerere*, *adhaerere*, *affixus*, and so on) is especially good. Following the treatment of creation, Meconi analyzes, in his third and fourth chapters, Augustine's depiction of what the Son, the incarnate one, and the Spirit, the inspiring one, do to restore creaturely intimacy with God, damaged

as it has been by the fall. It is in this context that Augustine uses the language of deification: the verb *deificare*, Meconi shows, is used only in connection with the incarnate one. He becomes human in order that we might become divine,—deified—and so it is necessarily the Incarnation that provides the possibility of deification for us. The restoration of the *imago* by way of the Incarnation is the locus, for Augustine, of talk about deification. Even in that place, however, as Meconi admits, sometimes with reluctance, deification is only one trope among many, and it is neither the most frequent nor the most significant. In some cases, however, its use is indeed striking. Meconi quotes and discusses Sermon 238, for example, in which Augustine tells his listeners that they ought to be certain that the Lord will give them his *divina*, his divine reality, so that they, who were human, will become gods (*ut qui homines erant dii fiant*).

Lastly, in the fifth chapter, Meconi treats the ecclesial reception of the divine life. The Church, he argues, is for Augustine the *totus Christus*, Christ's mystical body here below, together with the risen and ascended Christ, understood as "one single organism animated and amalgamated by grace" (233). *Totus Christus*, the whole Christ, serves, therefore, as an organizing trope for the idea that creation in its entirety, human, angelic, and the rest, will become "deified"—that is to say, transformed into profound and perfect intimacy with the Lord. Meconi provides in this chapter an elegant and accurate exposition of Augustine's sacramental theology, showing that Augustine's thought is the beating heart of his thought about the Church.

Meconi's book, as I have said, is accurate in its rendering of Augustine on the topics he treats, careful in its exegesis of particular texts, and a good corrective to those depictions of Augustine and Augustinianism that over-emphasize pessimism about the human condition, and thus make it difficult to see how the life of the Church—and, above all, the sacramental life—are grace-filled instruments for bringing about intimacy with the Lord. That is all very good, and the book is sufficiently clear and sufficiently broad in its scope, especially with respect to ecclesiology and sacramental theology, that it can profitably be read as an introduction to Augustine on those topics even by those without special interests in the deification question.

By the time I had finished the book, though, I found myself uneasy. It is not that there is anything wrong with what Meconi argues or anything inaccurate in its particulars. It is, rather, that there is a subtle distortion in the big picture. Meconi is eager, perhaps over-eager, to emphasize the idea of deification. But he is not as eager as he should be to undercut

that idea—to immediately take back with the left hand what the trope offers with the right. Augustine’s thought is replete with conceptual devices intended to emphasize the difference between the Lord and his creatures; such emphasis is one of his central concerns. Creatures are to be loved under the sign of use, for instance, while the Lord is to be loved under the sign of enjoyment; the Lord is the one whose beauty and love are what he is, whereas our beauty and love, such as they are, participate in and derive from his; and so on. Juxtaposing these fundamental and essential points with the language of deification—which is available and required because it is scriptural (Gen 3:5, 22; Ps 82:6; 2 Cor 3:17–18; and so on), a point that Meconi does not emphasize enough—transforms that language. It shows that deification does not mean being made God in the same way that liquefaction means being made liquid. It means, rather, being made as intimate with the Lord as is possible for a creature of a particular kind. Meconi knows this, of course, and says it sometimes. Nevertheless, the reader—this reader, anyway—finds himself shifting uneasily in his chair at about every tenth page and muttering to himself, “yes, but . . .” The point, I suppose, is that so far as I can see—and, I think, so far as Augustine could see—deification is and ought to be a minor trope in the fabric of Christian thought and talk. It ought always to be treated as such, handled as though it were a hot coal. Meconi treats it jauntily sometimes, as if his hands were fireproof. NEV

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Rekindling the Christic Imagination: Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization by Robert P. Imbelli (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2014) i-xx + 122 pp.

FATHER ROBERT IMBELL, recently retired longtime professor of theology at Boston College, has gifted the Church with this brief, beautiful work that encourages a deeper participation in Christ’s own life while eschewing the anxiety we entertain to develop ecclesial programs to prove our interest in the New Evangelization. In four chapters that flow from profound theological meditations upon ecclesial art, literature, and sacraments, the reader bathes in Catholic culture as the conduit for contemplation. The New Evangelization is both an invitation to receive Christ in ever-deeper levels of encounter and a mission to invite others into this encounter as well. If evangelization is to prosper in this age

of practical atheism, it is “intimate friendship with Jesus” (xvi) that the Church must communicate through all means possible. Evangelization is the desire to awaken others to being loved by Christ. This evangelization, however, is shocking because its substance carries the scandal of particularity. Evangelization is Christologically centered; one cannot receive the love of God generically: it is mediated by the one Christ. Evangelization is particular (Christ’s Cross), intimate (mystical), and public (personal transformation can be seen).

In receiving the love of Christ, one is transformed. This transformation affects the body and the mind. To be evangelized is to receive a Christic imagination. With this imagination a person does not simply imitate Christ; he participates in Christ’s mysteries. This emphasis upon participation (83) is a key theological motif for Imbelli and a theme that is truly at the core of all discipleship. One is not called to be “good” or “ethical,” but rather, like Henri de Lubac, Imbelli sees that the mysteries of Christ must come *before* morality. The Church must be possessed by Christ and, in being so possessed, is rendered beautiful and attractive. It is this beauty that attracts “all” to Christ. Such beauty wounds the consciousness of persons and frees them to ask, “Master, where do you live?” Christic beauty invites communion. The beauty that is most accessible to our senses is the radiating truth of holiness. This holiness is the only “new” thing in creation, and it is the real “agenda” of the New Evangelization. We can see that holiness attracts others to Christ in and through the lives of the saints. The saint evangelizes by allowing the Trinity to love him or her more each day. The saint attracts by radiation, not irritation. All sanctity arises from “the soil of the sacraments” (74), and it is to these sacraments that the saints lead the sinner, thus sharing their own source of “new” life. This new life exists in the Church in dramatic ways, ways that are abundantly fertile! Fr. Imbelli uses the glorious mosaic from the Basilica of San Clemente to make his point about the fertility of holiness and ecclesial life. To be evangelized means that a person has been moved into the beautiful Source of life: The Paschal Mystery. This Source, now inhabiting the soul, then irrigates the world with love and vibrancy. This source is Christ’s own spousal self-giving upon the Cross, mediated to us today through the sacraments. An ecclesial view of evangelization is one that draws people close enough to the source of its holiness that these peoples get drenched in life as well. “It is not what we do that is primary,” writes Imbelli, “but what God is doing through Jesus Christ” (50). The holy ones, those with imaginations born in their own participation in the Paschal Mystery, keep inviting God *to do more* and so keep holding

themselves open *to receive more*. In so doing they become beacons of evangelization, attractive persons who revel in having had their own minds moved beyond the mind of the present age! (Rom 12:2)

For Fr. Imbelli, Christ, even in his particularity, is no threat to individual freedom or to the diversity of the many cultures on the planet. Evangelization, however, can be threatened and the Church's freedom removed when outside agencies try to mute the beauty and uniqueness of Christ. In spite of this, the Church must bear the beauty of Christ without fear and in deep humility so that this beauty remains one that is only revealed and then offered, never exposed in order to coerce or manipulate. The Church simply desires to carry its transcendent message to all and then leave all free to be encountered by Truth, Beauty and Love: Jesus Christ. The Church points toward the divine communion that possesses it and only "captures" others by being faithful to the nature of Christ's own way of revealing His love: in respect for the developmental capacity of each person to receive the truth about both themselves and God (31). In this way Imbelli echoes what Pope Francis has been emphasizing in his way of evangelizing: the command by Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations "is born not from a desire for domination . . . but from the force of love" (96). This book is invaluable for seminary formation, college classes and RCIA gatherings, but most especially for personal *lectio divina*. Its message is powerful, and so must be received by one reader at a time soaking in its wisdom before the Blessed Sacrament. From such a contemplative reading of this book will come much wisdom for the New Evangelization. NEV

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Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation: The Mediation of the Gospel through Church and Scripture by Matthew Levering (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), xi + 363 pp.

WHEN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIANs talk about the "mediation" of divine revelation, their agenda, more often than not, is to emphasize the malleability of the Christian faith. A divine message that is mediated by human activity can seem to be very elusive and highly susceptible to distortion by the medium. This means that we can never be sure that received Christian doctrines really reflect the divine message.

Matthew Levering's very important book presents a different, and today much needed, approach. The author emphasizes that human mediation is an integral part of revelation. He is equally insistent, however, that we have good reason to trust the basic reliability of the mediating entities and processes. The Church is the locus where revelation is "received, enacted, and handed down" (2). Inspired Scripture is an essential part of this ecclesial mediation, which means that Scripture must be interpreted in the context of the Church's liturgical worship. A basic trust in the truthfulness of the Church's interpretation of revelation is made necessary by something as fundamental as belief in the Holy Spirit. Levering is, therefore, critical of "ecclesiastical fall narratives" that affirm the existence of a divine revelation but deny that it has been faithfully preserved by the Church. In the spirit of John Henry Newman, the author argues that this is an untenable position. The Christian doctrine of revelation is incoherent unless it includes, as an essential element, the Church's faithful mediation.

In order to expound and defend this perspective, the author engages contemporary theological debates in a number of areas. His vantage point is *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, and the book can be read as a creative defense of this document. The thought of Joseph Ratzinger—one of the architects behind *Dei Verbum*—is a discernible influence on the book in many respects, and Levering's way of combining a keen sensitivity to contemporary challenges with an equally strong orthodox instinct brings Ratzinger to mind. A method consistently used by the author is to argue for the importance of the Church, liturgy, priesthood, Tradition (etc.) on the basis of what Scripture has to say. This is an effective way of underwriting the inseparability of Scripture, Tradition, and the Church, and a fruitful approach in relation to the many Protestant voices with which Levering dialogues and upon which he draws.

A common critique against theologies that give the Church an active role in revelation is that the priority of God's action is thereby downplayed. In first and second chapters Levering counters this critique by firmly anchoring the Church's liturgical mediation of revelation in the theology of Trinitarian missions. At bottom, revelation is simply the Father's sending of the Son into the world, and the Church is nothing but a participation in the Son's mission under the guidance of the Spirit. By drawing on the thought of Aquinas, von Balthasar, and Christopher Wright, Levering highlights the intrinsic connection between the Church's mission, Christ's messianic mission, and the Trinitarian missions,

in order to show that the Church's active participation does not threaten the theocentric character of revelation. The Church's role can be understood in terms of a kind of "double agency"—God acts in and through our actions. The place where this is most manifest, and where the Church is preeminently drawn into the life and revelatory activity of the Trinity, is the liturgy, which the author views through the lenses of Alexander Schmemmann and Ratzinger. Liturgy is God's work for us, but also our sharing in God's work.

Chapter 3 discusses the role of the hierarchical priesthood for the mediation of revelation. The point of departure for the discussion is the classical "fall narratives" by John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes, according to which priestly mediation introduced a devastating source of conflict in the Church. Against this, Levering argues that priestly rivalry was present already from the start and that the New Testament is well aware of the problem and provides both spiritual and structural solutions to it. Jesus emphasized the connection between leadership and servanthip and taught certain "cross-centered" ways of limiting rivalry. Especially through participating in and remembering Jesus in the Eucharist, the Church and her leadership can be conformed to his cruciform love. The hierarchical priesthood, including the Petrine office, must be understood against the background of this Eucharistic reconfiguration of power in terms of mercy and service.

Although the argument about ecclesial cohesion and conflict resolution in chapter 3 is very enlightening in many respects, I think that an important aspect of the problem is left unaddressed. Unity, after all, is not worth much unless it is a unity *in truth*, which means that the hierarchy's role in promoting unity cannot be properly discussed in separation from its role in promoting truth. What is needed in this context is a discussion and assessment of the claim that the bishops receive a special divine assistance in service of truth. If this traditional claim is true, it follows that lay Christians normally have good reason to submit to episcopal authority in doctrinal and ethical questions, not just because the *unity* of the Church requires it—which would be an insufficient reason, considering the importance of remaining in the truth—but because the bishops are more likely to get things right. A credible case in favor of the legitimacy of the hierarchical Church must, in my view, include a defense of some kind of special divine, truth-aimed assistance of the bishops.

Chapter 4 argues that the Church is integral to revelation not only because she mediates revelation, but also because she belongs to the very content of revelation. True, the content of revelation is the Gospel, and

the content of the Gospel is Jesus Christ, but the story of Jesus includes the story of Israel and continues in the sacramental life of the Church as she journeys towards eschatological fulfilment. Following Aquinas, Levering argues that the Gospel is about union between God and man, which in a primary sense takes place in the Incarnation, but which in a secondary sense includes the adoption of believers as children of God. Our incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church, is hence an essential part of the Gospel. Levering joins Scott McKnight in emphasizing the need for a “Gospel culture” that puts Christ at the center but attends to the whole story of Israel and the Church, through which Christ in his entirety is present.

The next two chapters discuss the faithfulness of the Church’s mediation of revelation in terms of the reliability of Tradition and the continuity of doctrinal development. Chapter 5 presents, in the spirit of Yves Congar and *Dei Verbum*, Tradition as the fundamental form of the Church’s mediation of divine revelation and Scripture as a part of this divine communication. “The content of divine revelation cannot be handed down, even in Scriptural form, without being interpreted by the Church under the guidance of Christ and the Spirit” (172–173). But what does it mean to hand down the content of revelation faithfully? Levering addresses this question in critical dialogue with Terrence Tilley, who has delivered an influential critique of Catholic Tradition.

According to Tilley, Tradition has no definite propositional content, and doctrinal truth is reducible to how well doctrinal formulations manage to promote human authenticity. This means that doctrines can (and must) change profoundly in response to cultural and other developments and that this process of change unfolds in a non-teleological fashion. The “faithfulness” of Tradition is not, in other words, a matter of the stability of a deposit of faith, but should be understood in terms of how well adaptations and changes succeed in meeting the needs of people in different contexts.

Levering’s main criticism of this account is that it falsifies the view of Tradition that Scripture teaches. The New Testament, and Jesus himself, make a distinction between divinely revealed contents that must be faithfully handed down and human innovations that are not authorized by God. Tilley’s constructivist view cannot account for this distinction and is very hard to reconcile with much of what Jesus says in his encounters with the Pharisees (e.g., Mt 15: 5–6), or what Paul says with regard to the necessity of believing in Jesus’s Resurrection (1 Cor 15: 12–14). It seems that “Tilley advocates the kind of ever-changing human ‘tradition’

that Jesus and Paul . . . are at pains to reject” (173). This is a very cogent criticism. It is difficult to see how the distinction between authentic revelation (“commandments of God,” in Jesus’s words) and mere human constructions (“human traditions”) can be drawn in terms of how well putative revelations succeed in promoting authentic practices. Why cannot a merely human message sometimes promote such practices?

In chapter 6, Levering deepens his account of the transmission of revelation by addressing the hard question of doctrinal development. He defends a Newman-inspired perspective on development against the attack by John T. Noonan, who sees radical reversals and rupture where Newman saw, more or less, organic development. In response to Noonan, Levering appeals to recent scholarship about the Nicene period that emphasizes the holistic nature of development (Lewis Ayres and Khaled Anatolios). Development, according to Anatolios, has to do with recreating coherence in the whole of Christian life in face of new questions that challenge received interpretations. Levering seems to embrace, at least in part, this holistic view, which allows him to acknowledge certain “breaks” and discontinuities without denying an underlying continuity. Levering’s main strategy to counter Noonan, however, is to appeal to the distinction between definitive and non-definitive magisterial teachings. True development can involve contradictions between magisterial statements of a non-definitive kind, but not contradictions between definitive statements. Pope Benedict XVI’s “hermeneutic of reform,” which acknowledges continuity and discontinuity at different levels, is an obvious point of reference.

In chapter 7, the author discusses the inspiration of the Bible in dialogue with Origen and Augustine. The focus of the chapter is restricted to a rather limited—but important—aspect: what is the relationship between a doctrine of inspiration and the issue of the truth of Scripture’s historical narratives? From Augustine and Origen, as well as from Scripture itself, Levering retrieves a sense of history that acknowledges a spiritual “inside” and typological meaning to events. The deeper meaning of history—fully revealed in Christ—has to do with God’s providential ordering of events for the sake of salvation, and the modern restriction of the label “historical” to the outward dimension of history represents an impoverishment. If Christianity is true, the salvational meaning of history is really there, intrinsic to the unfolding of events, and to refuse to acknowledge it is to fail to be properly “historical.”

Dei Verbum’s claim that “every single part” of the Bible mediates revelation truthfully does not entail, for Levering, that every single event

described in the Bible's historical narratives must actually have happened. Appealing to the difference between modern and ancient historiography, Levering argues that some narrated events may be read as purely typological, but without thereby underplaying their "historicity" in a wider sense. The question of which events actually happened must be answered on a case-by-case basis through a "theological-historical dialogue rooted in faith's engagement with the particular narratives and the available historical evidence" (240). This is very sound advice in the context of a debate that often tends to neglect the enormous difference in (secular) historical credibility between New Testament and Old Testament narratives.

Pope Benedict XVI famously argued that "the encounter between the biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance," and that "the critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith."¹ Along similar lines, chapter 8 highlights the positive contributions of Hellenistic philosophy and language to Christian faith and discusses the significance of this for the theology of revelation. One positive contribution is the Greek insight about the immateriality of God, which helped to steer the Christian tradition away from materialistic conceptions of the Deity, despite important Scriptural ambiguities in this area. As usual, Levering appeals to Scripture in order to show both the mutual enrichment between biblical and Greek thought and the shortcomings of Hellenistic conceptions of God. Israel's reflection about God is affected by Hellenistic philosophy from the Second Temple period, and the New Testament explicitly concedes true insights about God to pagan philosophers (Levering especially discusses Acts 17—Paul's Areopagus speech—and the natural theology of Rom 1). The author's conclusion is that "divine revelation made fruitful use of the historical and cultural context . . . of the biblical authors and redactors" (283).

Levering's book as a whole presents a masterfully synthesized, creative, and convincing account—firmly grounded in Scripture and Tradition—of how the Gospel can be faithfully mediated by the very human, and hence ambiguous, phenomena of Church, Scripture, liturgy, Tradition, priesthood, and philosophy. The choice of these vulnerable media of revelation is not out of character for a Lord "who literally gives himself into the hands of sinners and who sends his Holy Spirit upon the very disciples who betrayed him" (297). The Spirit's guidance certainly does

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections" (lecture, University of Regensburg, Regensburg, Germany, September 12, 2006), http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

not protect the Church from all errors, but it protects her from certain kinds of errors—namely, from going wrong in her definitive interpretations of revelation. Without something like this divinely imposed limit on the Church's interpretive fallibility, there simply is no such thing as revelation. "We do not have divine revelation without faithful mediation" (3). This is an argument that needs to be made today, and Levering makes it with sophistication, sensibility, and immense erudition. Every chapter is a gold mine of references for those interested in the relevant debates.

What I especially appreciate about the book is its persistent insistence that revelation can transform "not only our hearts but also our minds through cognitive content" (13–14). The claim that revelation transmits propositional contents is not at all a given in Catholic theology today, as the book's very helpful introductory overview of recent theology of revelation (5–27) makes clear. The "anti-propositional shift" in the wake of Vatican II is, in my view, a disastrous development that must be reversed if Catholic theology is to retain philosophical credibility. The fatal mistake made by many theologians is to distance propositions (which are not strings of words, but conceptually structured, cognitive contents) from "revelation itself" and claim that propositions enter at a logically later stage, in the context of the *interpretation* of revelation. This opens up a host of philosophical problems and inevitably makes "revelation itself" irrelevant for the formulation of doctrine.

What is lacking here is the insight that Levering so effectively drives home—namely, that mediation (in this case, propositions expressed in human language) is intrinsic to revelation. Henri de Lubac is an example of a brilliant theologian (but bad philosopher) who makes the above-mentioned fatal mistake, and tendencies in the same direction can be found even in Ratzinger's work. Levering's book makes an important contribution in this respect. Not only because its account of faithful mediation highlights the question of propositional truth, but also because the author's understanding of mediation does not sharply separate a mysterious "revelation itself" from the mediating entities, such as propositions asserted by Jesus, or by Scriptural authors. However, in a footnote, the author says that "we need to be careful not to separate revelation from propositions . . . *even if in my view we should distinguish the two*" (24, n. 77, my italics). It might be the influence of Colin Gunton (whose theology Levering recounts in this context) that is behind the italicized statement, which in my view is false. Jesus asserted propositions when he taught, and

what Jesus asserts must surely count as revelation.² So there is no need to distinguish the two. 

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² Jesus' propositional teaching must at least count as revelation when it is understood and believed by his hearers.